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Winter 2000

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# CHANGING THE PITCH

## AMERICANISM, ATHLETICISM, AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF LEGION BASEBALL IN NEBRASKA

KENT M. KRAUSE

Since its inception in 1928, American Legion Junior Baseball has been popular in Nebraska. Although originally started to advance the Legion's ideological agenda of Americanism, the primary factor in the success of Junior Baseball has been an active level of support from the citizens and businesses in the state's communities. The Legion's program acquired and maintained such support because of the variety of functions it served in towns and cities across the state. First and foremost, Junior Baseball teams were important sources of

civic pride to Nebraskans who enthusiastically backed their local boys. The program also provided local businesses with advertising opportunities and offered a town's teenage boys a chance to experience athletic glory. Moreover, hosting a Legion tournament could provide a big boost to a town's economy as Nebraskans flocked to see these entertaining baseball games.

However, much of the active community support that proved crucial for the survival of Junior Baseball was tied to a quest for winning teams. As a result, the main emphasis of the Nebraska Legion's program shifted from Americanism to athleticism, focusing specifically on aspects pertaining to baseball excellence. This emphasis on athleticism created an environment that subverted many of the Americanism goals that the Legion originally held for Junior Baseball. Specifically, a focus on winning not only limited the total number of boys enrolled in the program but also led to unsportsmanlike behavior from the participants. Nonetheless, the veterans continued to sponsor this popular endeavor that still attracts the interest of thousands of Nebraskans each year.

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[GPQ 20 (Winter 2000): 19-33]

Regarding national context, in the 1920s many Americans believed the rise of modernism threatened their way of life. Primarily white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, these traditionalists viewed with alarm the growing acceptance of less restrained modes of behavior. The new music, dances, and sexually suggestive movies of the decade all reflected the troubling changes. Traditionalists, who were strongest in smaller, rural communities, blamed this modernist attack on the influx of immigrants who usually resided in the large cities. Old-stock Americans believed that these "foreigners" threatened their communities, the government, and even the Protestant faith. The emergence of a mass society in the 1920s sharpened the differences between traditionalists and those espousing modern values. As a result, the decade witnessed a great struggle between the two forces as traditionalists sought to defend their ideal of a homogeneous nation.

The American Legion, composed of veterans who fought in World War I, was one such group that feared traditional America was under attack. These ex-servicemen saw specific threats coming from Bolsheviks, radical labor unions, leftists, and immigrants, who, they believed, were working to subvert America from within. Equally dangerous, according to the Legion, were the growing pacifist groups who conspired to keep the country weak militarily in the face of numerous external threats. Legionnaires saw it as their duty to promote Americanism and thereby defend the nation from these postwar enemies. Although the veterans often had difficulty defining exactly what Americanism meant, their philosophy usually included a love of country and its democratic heritage, combined with a devotion to capitalism and a belief in the moral superiority of Americans. Initially, the Legion adopted a coercive form of Americanism, often physically assaulting groups they opposed. This, however, generated negative publicity for Legionnaires and by the mid-1920s, they looked for a more subtle way to save an America they thought was "under siege."<sup>1</sup>

In its crusade, the Legion viewed the nation's youth, especially its teenage boys, as crucial to the extrication of the country from its perilous position. To save America, the veterans believed that they had to teach the nation's boys to stand by the Legion's principles. Legionnaires reasoned that these young men would grow up to be the citizens, the leaders, and the soldiers of tomorrow. After experiencing limited success in winning the battle for the youth, by mid-decade the Legion came to view baseball, the "national game," as the ideal weapon to indoctrinate America's teenage boys. Baseball's preexisting ideology made it an attractive tool for the Legion. The game's publicists stressed that it taught the traditional American values needed for citizenship, helped assimilate immigrants, and provided military training for young men. Furthermore, since the game had been popular with boys, the Legion felt it would have little difficulty reaching millions by sponsoring a nationwide program of youth baseball. Finally, because of baseball's popularity with Americans, it served as a more subtle form of Americanism that could generate favorable publicity. Therefore, to help save a country it believed was under attack, in 1926 the American Legion began its sponsorship of Junior Baseball for teenage boys under the age of seventeen.<sup>2</sup>

Two years later, in 1928, the Nebraska Legion would sponsor a statewide Junior Baseball league and participate in the national program for the first time. Similar to Legionnaires across the nation, Nebraska veterans hoped the program would help advance their agenda. Ex-servicemen in Nebraska were specifically concerned about the rise of the pacifist movement which had gained strength in the 1920s. The Legion had actively campaigned against the growing movement, which sought to abolish military training as a required course for males at the University of Nebraska. Regarding Junior Baseball, Commander C. C. Fraizer of the Nebraska Department of the American Legion optimistically claimed "If the American Legion obtains the confidence

of our boys, those same boys will, when the ultra-pacifists ask them to join their insidious youth movements and take the slackers oath, say, 'No - we stand by the principles of the American Legion.'" In addition, some Nebraska veterans believed the program would help create "manly" men, as illustrated by a statement printed in the *Lincoln Legionnaire*: "too many REAL BOYS were playing tiddle-de-winks, and that REAL base ball games with REAL hard base balls is what we want these REAL boys to play." Finally, many veterans hoped the program could generate favorable publicity which might help the Nebraska Legion's declining membership. The state organization's numbers had dropped from 22,200 in 1925 to 16,272 in 1927.<sup>3</sup>

For the first season, Fraizer appointed Herb Gish, athletic director for the University of Nebraska, as the chairman of the state's Junior Baseball committee. Although this committee hoped to register over 100 teams in 1928, the final total stood at 86. Omaha, the state's largest city, led the way with thirty teams while the capital city of Lincoln had ten. In July the Nebraska Legion held its first Junior baseball tournament in Omaha, with one of the teams from the host city, the Tesars, capturing the state title. From this beginning, Legion baseball in Nebraska would grow over the next decade into one of the state's most popular athletic programs, enrolling over 500 teams and almost 9,000 boys in sixty-six towns and cities across the state in 1941.<sup>4</sup>

For the program to attain such strength, the veterans needed active, widespread support from each community where Junior Baseball sought to survive. The Legion could not organize a large-scale youth sports program without help. The posts could not alone bear the expense of uniforms, baseball equipment, umpires, coaches, fields, and transportation. In 1932 the Lincoln post bluntly stated in a newspaper article that, because of expense, it would not field a team unless a reliable business would agree to be a sponsor. A Legion baseball administrator later confirmed that "it takes a lot of good help to conduct a program

like this."<sup>5</sup> Therefore, for Junior Baseball to survive in Nebraska, the veterans needed to have the support of local businesses and boosters.

In Omaha, prior to the start of the first season in 1928, Legionnaires approached the state's largest newspaper, the *Omaha World-Herald*, looking for a cosponsor for the Junior Baseball program. The paper, which actively supported other sports programs in the city, such as scholastic baseball, agreed to the Legion's request. The *World-Herald* paid the expenses of umpires and scorekeepers in Omaha, in addition to providing medals for the district and state champion teams. In 1939 the paper estimated that it had spent just over \$1,000 per year on Junior Baseball in Nebraska. Remaining expenses for the city's teams were then covered by Omaha businesses. With the Legion's and the *World-Herald's* backing, a small business could sponsor an individual team without too much cost.<sup>6</sup>

Unlike Omaha, the Lincoln Legion did not have the one major cosponsor for its program. Nonetheless, the Legion post in the capital city still found local businesses willing to support Junior Baseball teams. Starting in 1928, Legion officials met with Lincoln businesses each spring to discuss program sponsorship. By 1936 the city had enough businesses to support three Legion Baseball leagues totaling twenty-two teams. In addition, the city recreation board cooperated with the Legion post, providing fields and helping to pay the coaches' salaries. In the 1940s the Lincoln Community Chest began donating money to help support Legion Baseball. In addition to this backing, capital city veterans depended upon individual volunteers to help with other aspects of the program, such as providing transportation for road games.<sup>7</sup>

Legionnaires in smaller towns also relied on businesses and prominent individuals to sponsor their Junior Baseball programs. Beyond this, they turned to social functions to raise money for their teams. These functions included ice cream socials, watermelon feeds, dances, concerts, and softball games. Some-

times support came in the form of gifts, such as in Alliance, a town of 6,253, where the Oldtimers Club donated equipment for the Junior Baseball team. The Legion also received support from other civic groups, as illustrated in Neligh where the fire department, Rotary Club and Women's Auxiliary contributed money for the baseball team. Money for Junior Baseball also came from the games' gate receipts and from subscriptions. Moreover, Legionnaires in small towns depended on volunteers to help with tournaments and to provide transportation for road games. In a statement that probably typified the program in most small towns, the *Nebraska Legionnaire* reported that in Alliance, "the whole program is built around volunteers."<sup>8</sup> Overall, whether in Omaha or a small town, the success of Nebraska Junior Baseball depended upon wide-ranging community support.

Even through the depression, the Legion successfully maintained the community support it needed for Junior Baseball. The Legion's prominence in the community provides one explanation for how it gained such backing. In small towns as well as in Omaha and Lincoln, Legion activities were frequently front page news in the interwar years, attracting great attention. Moreover, Legion posts often had strong ties with the business community. Illustrating this trend, the state organization's paper, the *Nebraska Legionnaire*, routinely published a list of proprietors who were Legionnaires or loyal boosters and urged readers to patronize these "buddies in business." Indeed, many of the proprietors of Nebraska businesses were members of the primarily upper- and middle-class Legion. A national survey from the 1930s revealed that one-third of the Legion's members owned their own businesses.<sup>9</sup>

Of all the businesses in a town, one of the most important for Junior Baseball was the newspaper, an entity that could create great interest in the program by providing generous coverage. In most Nebraska communities, the Legion maintained a good relationship with the press. The strength of this relationship is illustrated in a gesture from the state's Legion

in 1935. That year the veterans placed a series of advertisements in the *Nebraska Press*, the official bulletin of the Nebraska Press Association. The veterans explained that they did this as a way of "repaying the many kindnesses accorded the Legion by the state's newspapers." The gesture received favorable comments from numerous editors.<sup>10</sup> This positive relationship between the Legion and the press greatly benefited Junior Baseball, which occupied a large amount of space in Nebraska newspapers. In smaller towns, the exploits of the local Legion team, even regular season games, were usually included on the front page of the paper. Even in the capital city, the *Lincoln Star* generously covered Junior Baseball in its sports section.

The *Omaha World-Herald* proved to be Junior Baseball's most important sponsor in the state. In addition to providing umpires, scorekeepers, and medals, the paper thoroughly covered the program by printing game descriptions and box scores. In 1938 the *World-Herald* boasted that it provided "ALL the Results to ALL of the Games Played by ALL of the Teams Over ALL the State in American Legion Baseball." The paper's sports section often had pictures and stories featuring Junior Baseball players from across Nebraska. The *World-Herald* even selected All-State Legion teams to create more interest in the program. One of the paper's sportswriters, Robert Phipps, devoted so much effort to the program that the *Nebraska Legionnaire* called him "the best publicity man for Legion baseball in the state."<sup>11</sup>

While the Legion's close connections to the business community and the press stand out as significant reasons why it gained such great sponsorship of Junior Baseball, there is an even more important explanation. Specifically, Junior Baseball teams served as major sources of civic pride, often becoming an extension of a community's identity. Thus, Legion teams benefited from the same booster spirit that made successful high school teams so popular with their communities in the 1920s. Since Junior Baseball players were

hometown players, and not paid imports, they often had closer ties to the community than the local professional teams. A Nebraska sportswriter expressed this sentiment when he wrote about the Legion competition, "This tournament, which does not permit 'spiking' comes closest to producing a true Nebraska champion."<sup>12</sup> Moreover, with the Legion's state and national competition, Junior Baseball offered Nebraska towns and cities an opportunity to attain fame and glory, thereby transforming local teams into true extensions of the community that were capable of bringing important symbolic victories to their locale.

The popularity of Legion teams with their communities provided the key to financing the program. For example, local businesses were frequently eager to sponsor teams that were favorites with their customers. In addition to the good will associated with helping out such a popular program, businesses gained advertising space, usually by having their name printed on team uniforms. The Legion also benefited from a team's popularity at the gate. Even regular season and exhibition games involving Junior Baseball teams could attract crowds in excess of 1,000 spectators. Indeed, it was not uncommon for Legion games, especially tournament contests, to surpass the professionals in attendance. For example, in 1935 a Junior Baseball game in Lincoln could draw up to 1,200 fans, while the city's Nebraska State League franchise, the Links, struggled to attain one-third of that total. In July 1936 the Links disbanded with a debt of over \$3,800. Similarly, Omaha's Western League franchise suffered dwindling attendance and finance problems in the 1930s, finally having to leave the city in 1936. In contrast, Nebraska Legionnaires retained strong fan interest in their games and by charging a modest 25- or 50-cent admission fee, they could realize a fair profit from their contests.<sup>13</sup>

There are numerous examples of Nebraska communities showing enthusiastic support for their Junior Baseball teams. Regardless of the size of the population center, the Legion's pro-

gram could generate great levels of excitement. The Junior Baseball team in Neligh, a town of 1,649, provides one such example. In 1931 the first year Neligh fielded a team, the regular season as well as the tournament games were covered on the front page of both of the town's newspapers, sometimes occupying the top headline. When the team advanced to the state finals in Omaha, local supporters followed along en masse. Gate receipts and subscriptions covered the team's travel costs. After the Neligh boys went on to win the state title in 1931, a crowd of several hundred welcomed the team home and town motorists honked their horns in celebration. The players then enjoyed a banquet at a local hotel, a theater party, five gallons of ice cream, and free miniature golf as local businesses eagerly sought to reward the conquering heroes. In addition, fifty-seven boosters, ranging from individual townspeople to the local J.C. Penney store, took out a full two-page advertisement in the *Neligh News* congratulating the team and encouraging them on to success in the national tournament.<sup>14</sup>

Even though the Neligh team lost at the regionals, the town still enthusiastically welcomed the boys home with a celebration, including a speech from the mayor. The Neligh team was a symbol of not only town pride but also state pride, as evidenced by the numerous telegrams of encouragement sent to the players and coach, prior to the regional, from well-wishers across Nebraska. Neligh would win two more state titles in the 1930s, solidifying a prominent place for Junior Baseball in the community. A further example of the team's importance to the town is found in the depression year of 1934 when, after winning their third state title in four years, Neligh businessmen were so excited that they bought Coach Harold Cole a radio for his car.<sup>15</sup>

The immense community popularity generated by Legion baseball teams was not limited to small towns but extended to both Omaha and Lincoln as well. The support in these two cities could reach frenzied levels, especially for winning teams. In Omaha, the

best example of this community pride in Junior Baseball is found in the 1939 season. That year, the city's most highly regarded team was the McDevitts, comprised of boys from Creighton Prep, a Catholic parochial school. Interest in the team increased as they went undefeated through the regular season and narrowly defeated a powerful Neligh squad in a dramatic come-from-behind victory in the tournament. In the state finals, the McDevitts' opponents would be a city rival, the Red Tops, comprised of boys from Omaha South. Having two of its own teams in the finals stirred great excitement in the city. Illustrating the significance of this Junior Baseball event, the Omaha Amateur Baseball Association and the Catholic Youth Organization canceled their games so more fans could attend the opening game of the title series. The *World-Herald* printed numerous stories and pictures to generate interest in the game that was played on Sunday, August 6. For this first contest of a best of three series, ten policemen were assigned to handle the crowd at Fontanelle Park, which topped the 15,000 mark. This total made it the largest crowd ever to attend a baseball game in Nebraska up to that point. The McDevitts won the contest and captured the state title two days later in front of 10,000 more fans to keep their unbeaten streak alive.<sup>16</sup>

The victorious Omaha squad next played at the four-team national Legion regional tournament in Aberdeen, South Dakota. In addition to extensive newspaper coverage, Omaha's KOWH radio station provided play-by-play accounts of the games. After the McDevitts won the regional championship at Aberdeen, they earned a spot at the Western Sectional in Stockton, California. Upon returning from Aberdeen, 1,000 fans, a band, and the mayor, Dan Butler, welcomed the players home. While in California, the *World-Herald* covered the team every day, reporting on their practices and trip to the World's Fair at Treasure Island. For the games, the paper related that most of Omaha's radios were tuned in to the play-by-play accounts. After the

McDevitts eliminated both of their opponents and won the sectional, the city of Omaha went "baseball crazy." Between 8,000 and 10,000 gathered to welcome the team home, and the boys were treated to a parade and a banquet. The *World-Herald* reported that with the McDevitts in the finals, the baseball dreams of Nebraska were realized and the sport would return to a preeminent place in Omaha. The city had been without a minor league team since 1936.<sup>17</sup>

Since Legion officials had previously decided that the Junior World Series would be held in the city of the Western Sectional champions, the excitement in Omaha as well as the state of Nebraska further increased. For the opening game of the best of five series against Berwyn, Illinois, at Fontanelle Park on August 31, the *World-Herald* covered the McDevitts' triumph on its front page. The Junior Baseball finals might have even been the top headline in the paper had Germany not invaded Poland, starting World War II. For the series, 40,000 fans watched Omaha capture the national title three games to one, the first and only time a Nebraska team has accomplished this feat. The *World-Herald* printed numerous columns chronicling the event and published entire pages of action pictures taken at the games. Three local radio stations provided play-by-play accounts of the contests that were attended by numerous luminaries including the state governor, R. L. Cochran. After their triumph, the McDevitts remained busy on the banquet circuit receiving the praise of local backers. A Legion publication later reported about the event, "Never had a city the size of Omaha gone so thoroughly junior baseball crazy."<sup>18</sup>

In addition to the teams, the Legion's baseball program could also create civic excitement when a city hosted a Junior Baseball tournament. With state contests, regionals, sectionals and the finals, the Legion tournament offered Nebraska towns and cities additional opportunities to advertise and promote their community. A Junior Baseball tournament attracted press coverage as well as a

multitude of visiting fans and players who would then patronize the host town's businesses, providing a boost to the local economy. Since the Legion chose as host cities those places that provided good baseball facilities and large crowds, Nebraska communities often went to great lengths to increase their likelihood of being selected.<sup>19</sup>

For a small city in Nebraska, hosting a Legion tournament could be a historic occasion. When Neligh hosted the state finals in 1934, a crowd of 2,000, larger than the town's total population, attended the final game. In 1939 in York, a town of 5,383, a state semifinal contest produced 1,600 fans, the largest baseball crowd in the town's history. That record only lasted a year, however, because in 1940 York hosted a national regional tournament in which 2,500 watched a team from Enderlin, North Dakota, defeat the Nebraska state champions from Lincoln. Prior to the event, the York Chamber of Commerce and Rotary and Lions Clubs actively helped with the preparations. The city council authorized a new lighting system for the town's ballpark, which also received a new public address system, pressbox, and paint job for the occasion. On the evening before the first game, the York Legion and Auxiliary provided a banquet for the participants, a customary event at Legion tournaments.<sup>20</sup> Because Nebraskans showed such strong community support for Junior Baseball, Legion officials frequently chose small cities in the state, such as York, Grand Island, Hastings, and Scottsbluff, to host their regional tournaments.

With greater media attention and fan interest, the Junior World Series stood as the prize event for a city to host. Local Legionnaires and businessmen went to great lengths to attract this event and make it a success. Having hosted several regional and sectional tournaments in the 1940s and 1950s, Hastings attracted the attention of national Legion officials as an enthusiastic Junior Baseball city. As a result, in 1959, the Legion made Hastings only the second Nebraska city to ever host the Junior World Series. This event turned out to

be so popular that the Legion placed the finals in Hastings again in 1960.<sup>21</sup>

The entire Hastings community, including the 150-plus businesses that were Junior Baseball boosters, joined in promoting the finals. The city's Duncan Field received several thousand dollars' worth of renovations, including improvements for the parking lot and roads leading to the park, as well as more than 1,200 new seats to push the stadium's total capacity over the 5,000 mark. The *Hastings Daily Tribune* devoted numerous articles and pictures to the event and printed a forty-page special edition dedicated entirely to Junior Baseball. Local businesses placed large advertisements in the paper hoping to attract attention and money from the visitors flooding the city. Even though the Hastings team did not win, the 1960 finals were a success, attracting 28,688 total fans and generating \$31,907 in gate receipts. While the national Legion organization took 80 percent of that total, the local post still had a comfortable surplus from the remainder. Of greater importance for Hastings, visiting fans and Legion officials spent an estimated \$60,000 during their stay in the city. The Legion baseball finals was the event of the year, and the local paper reported that it generated more publicity for the town than any other community project. City officials and businesses naturally supported the post's bid to host the finals again, and the Legion complied for 1961 as well as 1969.<sup>22</sup>

Overall, the Junior Baseball program created great civic pride in Nebraska communities, both large and small, in addition to the economic benefits and entertainment it provided. Legion baseball also offered something to the boys living in Nebraska towns and cities. First, with the extensive press coverage and fan following that accompanied Junior Baseball, playing on a team offered those teenage boys who were skilled at the game a chance at fame and glory. Teams that enjoyed on-field success were commonly treated to dinners and other benefits from local sponsors. Participating on a winning Legion team often provided players with enduring memories. For



example, Bob Gibson, long after his Hall of Fame career with the St. Louis Cardinals had ended, proudly recalled that in 1951 his Omaha Legion squad was the first black team to ever win a Nebraska state championship.<sup>23</sup>

Impressed by the chance to wear an actual baseball uniform, many Nebraska boys such as Johnny Hopp, who starred for Hastings in the 1930s, considered the Legion program their first "real" baseball experience. Even for those players in Junior Baseball who did not win championships, the program gave them something to do during the summer months, an especially important aspect to teenagers living in smaller towns. Bob Phipps, who grew up in a small town, promoted this last point in 1934 when he asked, "What is there to hold a boy's interest in a town and what's to keep him from getting out as soon as possible except something like Legion ball?"<sup>24</sup>

Junior Baseball could also help talented youngsters advance their future career in the game. Legion baseball in many areas served as a feeder program for the amateur and semiprofessional teams in the community. In fact, the Legion's program often functioned as a rite of passage for those boys hoping to remain in the community's baseball subculture. For example, in 1939 former Junior Baseball players comprised the entire roster of Hastings' Nebraska Big Ten League team. Former Junior Baseball players in some Nebraska cities, including Lincoln and Hastings, sometimes formed teams to play exhibitions against barnstorming teams and current Legion squads. These contests could potentially attract large crowds of Nebraska baseball fans.<sup>25</sup>

Many Nebraska Junior Baseball players did not stop at the amateur or semiprofessional level. For those boys in the state who had college or professional aspirations, Legion baseball offered indispensable training. This proved especially true during the depression, when many Nebraska towns, even one the size of Hastings, did not offer a high school baseball program. Johnny Hopp believed Junior Baseball provided him with the fundamentals he needed to succeed as a professional. Hopp went

on to play in the major leagues as an outfielder and a first baseman from 1939 to 1952. Neligh star Richie Ashburn, in recalling his experience with the Legion program, credited his coach, Harold Cole, with knowing as many of the fine points of the game as the average professional manager. Ashburn later played in the majors for fifteen years and was inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame in 1995.<sup>26</sup> Of those Nebraska boys who did make it to the major leagues, a vast majority had experience with Legion baseball.

Junior Baseball players who did continue in the major or minor leagues provided an additional source of community pride for their hometown. Nebraska Legionnaires and journalists delighted in reporting on the progress of their former Junior Baseball stars since these players served as walking advertisements for the virtues of their community's program. Some of these players even expressed their gratitude with gifts, like former Hastings star Dick Spady, who donated \$500 to the town's Legion post after he received a minor league contract and signing bonus from the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1948.<sup>27</sup>

In the 1930s and 1940s, the Nebraska Junior Baseball program attained a high level of popularity and remained financially viable because it enjoyed thorough support from many of the state's communities. At the same time, however, the Nebraska program, similar to Junior Baseball in the rest of the country, became elitist and focused primarily on building winning teams. This focus on athleticism resulted in Junior Baseball reaching fewer boys because those players with less talent often could not make the cut. Furthermore, it was a concern for winning that frequently led to unsportsmanlike behavior, which in turn overshadowed the teaching of the program's original Americanism goals. Ironically, the community support that Junior Baseball needed to survive was largely derived from the ability of a post to put a successful team on the field. Thus, the quest for winning teams generated the greatest amount of community enthusiasm but also served to shift the main

emphasis of Junior Baseball away from its original ideological agenda.

The emphasis on winning in Junior Baseball was present even in the first decade of the Nebraska program and was oftentimes fostered by the Legionnaires themselves. For example, when the *Nebraska Legionnaire* summarized the history of the program in 1941, the article did not focus on any citizenship accomplishments but rather on the success that the state's teams had enjoyed in the national tournament. Similar to the national trends, a concern for winning so permeated the Nebraska program that it often led the adults in charge to engage in unsportsmanlike or questionable actions. In 1928, for example, at the very first state tournament, the Newman Grove team was disqualified for using two players above the age limit. In 1931 the Minatare coach allowed his pitcher to pitch an entire tournament game with a broken ankle. The unfortunate player could not field ground balls and went hitless in four at-bats in a losing effort. The following year, coach Harold Cole of Neligh sent a pitcher into a state tournament game even though he had cut fingers. His team lost and the paper reported that "blood dripped from his injured fingers with every pitch." Several years later, a Nebraskan from Newman Grove even complained to the national commissioner of baseball, Kenesaw Mountain Landis, that an Omaha manager was ruining his star pitcher's future by overworking him in the tournament. The complaint did have merit since the boy in question, on two separate occasions, pitched twenty or more innings over a span of three consecutive days.<sup>28</sup>

One of the most telling criticisms of the Nebraska Junior Baseball program came from one of its most fervent supporters, *World-Herald* sports reporter Robert Phipps. Once described as the "best publicity man" for the program, for many years Phipps worked to promote Junior Baseball, describing in his articles its value in teaching baseball and citizenship. He told a different story privately, however, when he wrote to the national Junior Baseball

director, Homer Chaillaux, in December 1936. In what he described as "a frank statement," Phipps held that "the competition is rapidly becoming a detriment to good will promotion." This is because, according to the sportswriter, the Legion posts were indifferent to the lack of sportsmanship and "virtually nothing is being done to curb the rising volume of bickering, dissension and cheating."<sup>29</sup>

In a second letter to Chaillaux, Phipps elaborated that he "could write a history about 10 volumes concerning the cheating and alleged cheating [in Junior Baseball]." The journalist recounted how unsportsmanlike managers in rural Nebraska would grab the best players from up to four counties for their team. Phipps continued that when a star player is recruited away like this, "the town he left will be too discouraged to enter the competition." The sportswriter added that, because of bickering, the program was not teaching good citizenship and that boys were learning from the unsportsmanlike behavior of the adults. To make matters worse, Legion posts in the state refused to clean up the program and police the activities of team managers. Phipps next related how Nebraska teams commonly violated the rules by borrowing out-of-town players to increase their strength for the tournament. He concluded the letter by describing how the Legionnaires in Columbus did nothing while the town's fans angrily rioted and stormed the field because they disagreed with the umpire's calls during a game in which their team had fallen behind seventeen to nothing.<sup>30</sup>

Phipps expressed to Chaillaux that the *World-Herald* tried to avoid mentioning the riots, ill will, and dissension that existed in Junior Baseball. Nonetheless, the writer held that such news spread by word of mouth and the program's reputation suffered. It is true that events such as the Columbus riot and use of ineligible players did receive coverage in Nebraska papers, so Phipps was correct that the program's problems oftentimes did not remain secret. His other main allegation, that

the excessive concern for winning ultimately reduced Junior Baseball's numbers in the state, also appears to have merit.<sup>31</sup>

In 1932 the Nebraska Legion claimed that over 5,000 boys in the state played Junior Baseball, their highest total to date. There were, however, approximately 37,000 boys aged fourteen through sixteen in Nebraska that year, indicating that the Legion reached less than one out of seven of those eligible. In 1941, with the age limit raised to include seventeen-year-olds, the state's Junior Baseball chairman estimated that between 8,000 and 9,000 boys played in the program. This estimate also included those in the under-fifteen midget division. In Nebraska that year, there were about 61,000 boys aged thirteen through seventeen. Thus, even taking the high estimate of 9,000, Junior Baseball still did not do much better than one out of seven Nebraska boys in the relevant age groups. Even in the record-setting year of 1946, the Legion program averaged only about one out of six eligible youths.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, even during peak years, Junior Baseball did not enroll a high enough percentage of boys to make a large societal impact with respect to its original goals. A closer look at the program provides insights into how elitism caused this result.

Although Nebraska Legion baseball was inclusive in allowing boys from the state's various class and ethnic groups to try out for its teams, it was exclusive regarding baseball ability. For example, in Hastings in 1932, eighty-eight boys tried out for Junior Baseball but only the best thirty made the initial cut, and of these, only fifteen would make the team. Town Legionnaires preferred to sponsor only one talented team rather than include all eighty-eight hopefuls. Despite a potential of five teams, the Hastings program, in the end, only enrolled less than 5 percent of the town's 300-plus boys aged fourteen to sixteen. Throughout the following decades, Hastings usually fielded only one or two Junior Baseball teams each year. The town post did, however, have an impressive number enrolled in its midget program. In 1945, for example, 280

youths played in this division for boys aged twelve through sixteen. This figure was close to half of Hastings' total number of boys in this age group.<sup>33</sup>

A similar situation existed in Omaha which had 367 boys playing on 28 Junior Baseball teams in 1932. By 1940, however, there were only eight teams in the city's junior division. Thus, the Legion reached only a fraction of the city's 3,500 boys aged sixteen and seventeen at that time. There were, however, more than 90 midget teams in Omaha in 1940, and the Legion enrolled over one-fifth of the city's 5,000 boys aged thirteen through fifteen.<sup>34</sup>

This trend of a large midget program (usually ages 12-15) and selective junior division (usually ages 15-17) became the norm for Nebraska Legion baseball. For example, in 1946, the state had 8,634 midgets and only 2,412 juniors.<sup>35</sup> These numbers further illustrate the impact of the concern for winning. Since the midget category did not play for a national title, it had a less competitive emphasis, and thus, more boys were given a chance to play. Furthermore, since the midget division served as a feeder program or farm system for the community's elite Junior Baseball team, it made sense to include as many of the younger players as possible. If a city had a sizable midget program, the Junior Baseball coach would have a better selection in picking talented players for his own team, which served as the more important source of community pride.

Overall, the emphasis on winning teams did limit the number of boys included in Nebraska Junior Baseball, thereby blunting the program's original Americanism goals. As communities expressed more enthusiasm for winning teams, the adults in charge had less interest in attaining mass participation. Legionnaires had little incentive to try to reverse the changes occurring in their popular baseball endeavor because it was the elite teams and athletes that made the program so exciting to communities. Junior Baseball with a focus on athleticism thus more closely resembled a varsity sport rather than a scholas-

tic physical education course aimed at teaching as many teenage boys as possible.

Beyond the elitism, the program's emphasis on athleticism also diluted the Americanism lessons that were to be taught to those players who actually were in the program. These boys instead learned from adults who were concerned primarily with building winning teams. As a result the major lessons taught in the program focused on baseball excellence. The recollections of Gibson, Hopp, and Ashburn support this conclusion as do the comments of Legion baseball alumni who gathered in Lincoln for a reunion in 1998. When asked about their memories of the program, the vast majority of these men, who played between the years 1935 and 1955, not surprisingly recalled events relating to their onfield success, not lessons in civics or patriotism.<sup>36</sup> Boys who played in Legion baseball could learn a great deal about the game itself but very little about the ideology of Americanism.

In assessing the program's strength over time, Nebraska Junior Baseball remained very popular throughout the 1930s, capped off by the media frenzy surrounding Omaha's national title in 1939. With Legion teams providing civic pride and entertainment at a relatively low cost, the program thrived during the depression, while at the same time the state's minor league franchises struggled to survive. Moreover, with many high schools unable to offer varsity baseball, the Legion program had an increased significance to Nebraska youths at this time. Finally, with the federal government spending money on ballparks and athletic fields, Junior Baseball received an additional boost during the depression. For example, Hastings' Duncan Field, the only ballpark to ever host three consecutive Junior World Series, was originally built as a Works Progress Administration project.<sup>37</sup>

Since the major stimulus for Junior Baseball was community support, when it waned, so too did the program. World War II provided the first such occurrence of this on a national scale. As the United States shifted its focus toward the war effort, communities

had less time and resources for Junior Baseball. Because of the wartime travel restrictions and decline in community support, many Nebraska towns had to drop out of the program. Even Omaha, which had over ninety midget teams in 1940, saw that number cut by more than half in 1944. Overall, the state, which once had as many as 9,000 boys in Junior Baseball in 1941, could only muster 2,400 for the entire program in 1943.<sup>38</sup>

The end of World War II saw a revival of interest in Junior Baseball. Nebraska communities were no longer distracted or limited by travel restrictions. In 1946 Legion baseball in Nebraska set a new record, with 11,046 boys involved in all levels of competition. This trend proved to be short-lived because in the post-1950 era, nationwide changes in American leisure patterns, the rise of television, and the increased popularity of other sports caused an overall decline in support for baseball. These changes primarily hurt professional baseball, but the game also suffered in the semipro, amateur, and Legion ranks as young athletes increasingly sought to excel in other sports. Moreover, Legion baseball also declined in the post-1950 era because of increased competition for civic backing. Specifically, with the rise of a host of other youth sports programs, the Legion program was no longer the undisputed possessor of community support in this area. As a result of these trends, program strength declined; the number of boys playing Legion baseball in 1967 was less than 60 percent of the 1946 total.<sup>39</sup>

This decline of Junior Baseball was damaging but not devastating, however, because with their homegrown players Legion teams still served as important sources of community pride in the post-1950 era. As a result, the program continued to enjoy support from community boosters. In Lincoln, for example, numerous local businesses still support the city's fourteen teams. Moreover, Legion teams, like Lincoln's 1997 state champion J. C. Brager team, continue to stir civic pride. After this team, one of eight in the city's junior division, brought the first state title to Lincoln since

1955, local businesses congratulated the boys with a sizable advertisement in the *Lincoln Journal Star*. In addition, a pep rally, complete with a band and cheerleaders, was staged prior to the team's departure for the regionals. Thus, after seven decades, Legion baseball is still one of the state's most popular summer sports programs.<sup>40</sup>

Although the Legion initiated its Junior Baseball program to advance its ideological agenda in the 1920s, the program maintained strong popularity in Nebraska because of active, dedicated support from the state's communities. Since Junior Baseball teams served many functions, they were considered great community assets. Most importantly, Legion teams were great sources of community identity and civic pride. The excitement generated by star players, winning teams, and hosting tournaments illustrates how significant the Junior Baseball program had become to the state's communities.

The focus on winning teams, however, actually subverted the program's ideological goals. The quest for victory often led even the adults in charge to engage in unsportsman-like activities. Moreover, the program became elitist, denying many less talented boys the opportunity to play. Since communities better supported an elitist program based on athleticism, the veterans did little to change the situation. Legion baseball strength, in turn, came to be measured in sponsors, publicity, and fans, not total number of players indoctrinated with the ideology of Americanism.

## NOTES

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